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Pavillion: The town a fracking controversy destroyed



Jon Martin stands with his dogs in 2012 on his back porch in Pavillion. Martin was part of a group of neighbors who banded together out of concern for bad publicity surrounding Pavillion's water issues.

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PAVILLION -- Tex and Dale Frazier try to stay out of the controversy that has plagued this community for the past decade. The couple opened the Lucky Duck, a diner, in October. In a town of roughly 230 people, they can scarcely afford to alienate any neighbors.

"I can't take a side. I've got a business," said Tex, who was elected as the town's mayor in November. Dale, seated at a table behind him in the diner, nodded her head knowingly.

"I've got friends on both sides," Tex said.

Pavillion has been fractured ever since residents 5 miles east of town started complaining about their water last decade. In 2011, a preliminary report by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency linked the faulty water to fracking in an old gas field nearby.

That the contaminated water was found outside Pavillion's city limits is a point many residents like to stress.

"Our problems are not the water," Dale said, echoing a common refrain heard here.

Few noticed the distinction, and Pavillion became a byword for bad water. The controversy erupted just as a drilling boom was taking hold in large swaths of the country.

Industry, worried EPA's findings would hamper production elsewhere, rushed to discredit the report. Environmentalists, looking for proof fracking could contaminate groundwater and threaten public health, touted it as evidence of what could go wrong in a drilling boom.

And the national media descended on the town in droves. Residents can tick off a list of media outlets they have spoken to over the years: CNN, ABC, CBS, Bloomberg. The list goes on.

A documentary, "Gasland," was made and nominated for an Oscar. A sequel followed. Pavillion was featured in both.

Few journalists call anymore. The EPA turned over its investigation to Wyoming regulators in 2013 and Pavillion faded from the news.

The state investigation is ongoing. A report on the area's water quality is expected to be released in July.

The scars, meanwhile, live on.

Dale recalled attending a convention recently in Cheyenne: "You say you're from Pavillion and they say, 'How bad is your water?'"

Tex agreed. One of his campaign pledges was a promise to promote the quality of Pavillion's water.

"There are only two things Pavillion is famous for: bad press and our basketball team."

Wind River High School won the Boys Class 2A State Championship in 2015. The boys run on gas, he joked, and then thought better of it. Maybe keep that quip out of the story, he asked.

Louis Meeks has been greeting visitors to his farm in the same way for years. He takes them to a large plastic sink in the mudroom, turns on the water, fills a large mason jar, screws on the lid and shakes it. Then he offers his visitor a whiff.

The smell is still putrid, almost like the odor of a gas grill that will not light.

"Mead came out here with his wife," he said, referring to Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead and his wife, Carol. "You should have seen his face when he smelled it."

Meeks and his wife, Donna, have been two of the leading protagonists in Pavillion's drama. They were among the first landowners to complain about the taste and smell of their water.

The couple have seen their lives' changed by the controversy. They no longer raise sheep, cattle or chickens. That would require water, and water at their farm would kill the animals, they say.

They keep a horse at their property for their granddaughter, who participates in the local 4-H program. Donna hauls 20 gallons of water daily to keep the animal watered. As for themselves, empty gallons of bottled water fill their kitchen.

Louis' outspoken opposition to Encana Corp., the company that operates the gasfield, has won him plenty of detractors in town. He fell out with some of the other residents in the Pavillion Area Concerned Citizens, which has sought to link Encana's operations to the contamination.

"I don't give a damn what they say. I know what's going on out here," he proclaimed defiantly from a seat in his living room.

When Louis rose and left the room to meet the mailman, Donna explained some of the fights he has had with their neighbors.

"Louis says it real black and white," she said. "It's hard for some people to take."

Wyoming agreed to install cisterns at 31 residents' homes, providing up to 4,000 gallons a month for free. The water is paid for by a \$400,000 appropriation approved by the Legislature.

The Meeks decided not to accept the cisterns. The money may not be enough to cover residents' needs, and the account is expected to run dry in seven or eight years, Louis said. Residents shouldn't be expected to then pay for a problem they didn't create, he said.

The couple feels Encana should pay for the damage they caused, but some days they also feel defeated.

"Sometimes I think they are waiting for me and Donna to die," Louis said.

For them, the state investigation represents a reversal. They gave it a chance at first, but now they have little expectation of it providing any firm answers about the source of their problems.

Selling and moving doesn't seem like an option. Who would want their place anyway, and where would they get the money to buy another home?

So they have resolved to soldier on.

"You wanna finish what you started," Donna said. "You have to remember you're not the only one in this fight."

If Donna and Louis Meeks are the leading actors opposing Encana, John Martin and his sister Joan Tuck are their foil.

Martin, a local pastor, entered the fray from the opposite side when the EPA announced its findings in 2011. Concerned his property values would take a hit from the ensuing controversy, Martin has helped mount a vigorous defense of the gas company.

"My life investment was wrapped up in the farm I had," he said after finishing breakfast at the Lucky Duck.

Martin has lived in Pavillion for about 10 years, and Tuck moved to town nearly decade ago after retiring from her job as a school teacher in Nebraska.

The pair said their water was never contaminated, but their home values suffered as a result of that perception.

Martin has helped spearhead the effort to install cisterns for residents here, even though he feels many were unnecessary.

"It was all perception, but it needed to be fixed because perception becomes reality," he said.

His sister was one of those to install a cistern.

"If I hadn't done that my property wouldn't have gone up," Tuck said.

Martin has since sold his farm and moved to a new house. He remains committed to trying to alter the perception that this community suffers from contaminated water.

"Pavillion's water has never been bad, but because of the name and the way it went down, everyone took a hit," he said.

The situation has mellowed and the town is beginning to return to normal, he said. But he acknowledged the community remains divided. Some people still need resolution. And while the state investigation may provide closure to some, it is unlikely to please others, Martin said.

Only time, he added, will heal those wounds.

Follow energy reporter Benjamin Storrow on Twitter @bstorow